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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PARM SY IS LE
SUBJECT: LEBANON: A/S WELCH'S MEETING WITH PM SINIORA
DECEMBER 15

Classified By: Charge d'Affairs William Grant for Reasons: Section 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) During his December 15 meeting with Prime Minister Siniora at the Grand Serail, NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch pledged continued U.S. support for the March 14 majority and democracy in Lebanon. He assured the PM that the USG would make no deal with Syria or others at the expense of Lebanon. Siniora spoke eloquently about the need for March 14 to remain unified and strong in its support for the consensus candidate for president, Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman. He asked for U.S. support for coordinating a synchronized message of support from the international community and sending a firm warning to Syria about interference in Lebanese affairs. He suggested there be no further sanctions against individual opposition figures, which only enhanced their status as "anti-American" heroes, and asked for economic support for Lebanon's Central Bank to stave off a possible financial crisis in 2008. End Summary.

GRATEFUL FOR MESSAGE OF CONTINUED SUPPORT

¶12. (C) NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch met with PM Fouad Siniora for more than one hour on December 15. Also attending were Charge Bill Grant, Deputy Legal Advisor Jonathan Schwartz, NEA Staff Assistant Kimberly Harrington Acting Foreign Minister Tareq Mitri, Siniora's Advisors Mohamad Chatah and Rola Noureddine and Emboffs. A/S Welch conveyed the President's and Secretary Rice's continued support for PM Siniora and the March 14 majority. He stressed that there have been absolutely no changes in U.S. support toward Lebanon, and that the concerns about that raised by some (in the wake of the perceived USG outreach to Syria for the Annapolis conference) were baseless. Welch said the USG will support any solution to the presidential impasse that March 14 supports. "The President is behind you," he told the PM. Siniora expressed gratitude, admitting there had recently been a public perception that the U.S. position might be wavering in its support for Lebanon in order to gain cooperation from Syria on other regional issues. Welch made it clear that this was not the case.

Failed French Initiative and Plan B

¶ 13. (C) PM Sini ora was very critical of earlier French efforts to prevent the current presidential vacuum. He said the French initiative had been badly managed and had caused great harm to the Patriarch, who had been pushed hard to produce a list of candidates which was then ignored. Sini ora still wonders if French discussions with Syria led to the ultimate downfall of the initiative's intended goal.

¶ 14. (C) Sini ora admitted being part of the decision-making process that chose LAF Commander Michel Sleiman as the March 14 preferred candidate, a choice that surprised and embarrassed Syria. "We must stick with this plan. We cannot waiver and give the opposition reasons to believe there are still a range of alternatives open to them."

¶ 15. (C) Sini ora is strongly opposed to March 14 pushing for the "half plus one" approach to electing Sleiman or any president, which he considers to be suicidal for March 14 at this point. If March 14 is unable to elect a Sleiman as president, Sini ora indicated that the cabinet may have some creative ideas about how to fill vacant cabinet positions in a way to bring the Shia back in. "However, I don't want to talk about that now. It is more important that we show strength and focus on electing our consensus candidate," said Sini ora.

SYRIAN THREATS HAVE COME TO PASS

¶ 16. (C) Sini ora was in an expansive, talkative mood during this early Saturday evening meeting, with no additional visitors waiting to see him. He outlined to A/S Welch steps Syria has taken to threaten Lebanon's sovereignty in the last

18 months:

- 14 month paralysis of the Lebanese parliament
- four week vacuum in the Lebanese president's office
- executive authority and legitimacy of the Sini ora cabinet challenged
- incursions on Lebanese soil by Fatah al-Islam militants in Nahr al-Barid
- attack on the leadership of the LAF, Lebanon's strongest national institution
- challenges to both the Lebanese constitution and the Taif Agreement

Summing up his argument, Sini ora argued that Syria is not just going after March 14, but is trying to undermine all the state institutions of Lebanon.

WELCH: WE WILL NOT REACH AGREEMENT WITH OTHERS ON THE BACK OF LEBANON

¶ 17. (C) Sini ora said it was smart that the U.S. continued to refrain from "playing the name game" in terms of presidential candidates. However, noninterference had produced a public perception that the U.S. had struck a secret deal with Syria at the expense of Lebanon. Welch said we knew that some had this perception and that it was completely erroneous. The USG commitment to Lebanon had not changed. We would not reach an agreement with Lebanon or Syria on the back of Lebanon, he said.

¶ 18. (C) Sini ora stressed the need for a synchronized message from the international community about the need to hold elections quickly and without conditions attached. He asked the U.S. to work closely with the Saudis, Egyptians, and the Europeans. He mentioned that he had had personal discussions with German Chancellor Merkel and Italian PM Prodi on this topic, and that Prodi had said he would talk to the Syrians. A/S Welch noted that the Turks and Russians had been mentioned as interlocutors with Syria as well and that the Russians appear eager to engage on the topic in a positive manner.

¶9. (C) Siniora also asked that discussions with the Syrians be handled in a particular way. "Soft, silent, but firm diplomacy is best. A regime like that cannot tolerate public embarrassment and may react negatively to demeaning language.

The key is to be consistent but firm when telling them not to undermine Lebanon's sovereignty." PM Siniora hoped that private threats from countries in the region to boycott the Syrian-chaired Arab League Summit in March would be effective. The Egyptians are the best ones to deliver this message, he said.

¶10. (C) Chatah urged that the U.S. refrain from punitive actions against individuals seen as undermining Lebanese sovereignty. Rather than scaring the opposition, U.S. sanctions have become a badge of honor. Furthermore, according to Siniora, people in this violent region don't respect this bureaucratic measure as a "true weapon of strength or a big stick worthy of a superpower." "It makes the U.S. look weak," said Chatah. Siniora said the time has come to rethink U.S. strategy in this area. Perhaps it would be better to start shunning Speaker Berri in the same way that Michel Aoun has been marginalized. Siniora said that international players should stop treating Berri as a national leader if he refuses to act like one.

¶11. (C) Chatah also raised the issue of Lebanon's financial stability. Of greatest concern is the refinancing of some \$1.5-2.0 billion in government debt by March 2008. The Central Bank needed approximately USG one billion to maintain the confidence of the country's citizens and the international financial community.

¶12. A/S Welch has not cleared this cable.

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